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ABSTRACT

Based on his department's experience with curriculum change, the head of the English department at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) concluded that curriculum change must be local, incremental, and unending. A consequence of the claim that curriculum change should be local is that proposed changes must be consistent with local realities--and resources are an obvious and key component of local realities. Budgets are never just lists of numbers, since they exhibit the translation of choices into realities. UIC became a bachelor's degree granting institution in 1965. At that time virtually all the faculty taught composition and introductory literature courses in small sections of about 25 students. The first doctorate was awarded in 1983, but the number of English majors (and faculty) declined sharply in the 1980s. As faculty numbers declined and graduate student numbers increased, composition was handed over to teaching assistants. UIC devotes substantial resources to train teaching assistants. The training provided is an important mechanism for socializing new instructors and for establishing a strong sense that the teaching assistants are developing into professional colleagues who are sustaining a vital departmental and university program worthy of their energies and their pride. Any program, whether one beyond the means of a department or within them, has good and bad, advantages and disadvantages, and both will be different in each case. The task of departments is to face reality squarely--refusing avoidable constraints and seeking possible improvements. (RS)

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Curriculum Reform: Can We Afford It?

My Department's experience with curriculum change over the past two years of our participation in the MLA-FIPSE Project has led me to a conviction I've shared with anyone who had the patience to listen, namely, that curriculum change must be local, incremental, and unending. This conviction contradicts the quite widespread penchant for ambitious, comprehensive reforms. Against these far-reaching schemes, I have argued for what Karl Popper calls "piecemeal engineering" or what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls "bricolage," tinkering. It is in the nature of the case that academic intellectuals will find a systematic approach seductive and will feel that a piecemeal approach is little better than drift or muddling through in the uncritical hope that a hidden hand will make everything come out alright. But my own experience in tandem with large contemporary historical experiences have led me to distrust ambitious exercises in total rationality, whether Hegelian or Marxist or some application of systems analysis to social life. There is something attractive to the American character in concluding that we're in a mess and that the answer is to burn it down, redesign it completely, and then live happily in the world that revolutionary innovation has made new. I prefer C. S. Peirce's image that we are in a ship sailing across the ocean and that we have to fix it as we go while we continue to live in it.

The relevance of this to the question I've posed may not be apparent, but I think it provides the necessary framework for what I want to say. A consequence of the claim that curriculum change should be local is that proposed changes must be consistent with local realities--and resources is an obvious and key component of local realities. Grand projects of curriculum reform, in my experience, rarely keep fiscal realities in view. Hence, they characteristically end by asserting that this or that change is very important and that we simply must find resources to do it. Administrators sometimes encourage this attitude, taking it as a test of their machismo that they solve the resource problem out of public view and do not spoil the faculty's beautiful ideas with sordid talk about money.

This seems to me a bad approach for several reasons. An obvious one is that a faculty committee that floats a completely unrealistic reform proposal is going to find its dreams disappointed and is likely to react with irritation and even cynicism when in actual fact little changes. A second is that since what can be done is limited, a long wish list simply leaves to administrators the selection of what to do. The result is that the faculty don't have the control over curriculum change they should have and thought that were having. And since only part of the grand scheme ever becomes reality, we end up with piecemeal changes anyway. Finally, to ask a faculty committee, "How do you think we should change the curriculum?" is to invite it to a fruitful exercise of

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speculation. Daydreaming is corrupt imagining. To ask it the more sober question, "What in your judgment is the best curriculum we can offer with these resources?" is likely to produce better thinking because it invites the mind to engage with solid realities, and doing that is, after all, what we have minds for.

The slogan about resources that I repeatedly fall back on is: we can do anything; we just can't do everything. Resources are always limited but, paradoxically, always sufficient. Our sense of insufficiency arises from violating the principle that there is no point in pursuing a policy that exceeds your capabilities. To pursue inflated goals leaves a Department forever in crisis, depressed at constantly falling short. Two years ago, my University's budget was cut 3%--modest in comparison to many universities around the country, though the troubles of others even when greater than our own are little consolation. The result was that hiring for the next year was cancelled, and the hard work of several search committees went down the drain. But it seemed to me worth pointing out that we would spend in the next year 97% as many dollars as we were spending in the current year, and that meant roughly $3 million. Suppose one chose--and it is indeed a matter of choosing--to focus not on the small reduction but instead on the very large remaining base. Imagine starting from scratch and asking what sort of English major one could mount for our students if we were given $3 million. I think the answer would have to be that we could mount a pretty good instructional program. What worried me most was the potential for demoralization if faculty lost sight of the very plain fact that our Department is doing something of very high quality and very important for a large number of students who have no realistic alternative to the program our public university offers. If we have evidence for the belief that we are doing the best we possibly can with the resources available, then the faculty can and ought to feel proud of what they are doing. Certainly, we should always be a little discontented. We should always argue for a little more money and be ready to make good use of it if we are fortunate enough to get it. I'm not proposing passivity or adopting the motto, "What! Me worry?" But in fact the reputation for being realistic is more likely to reap an added allocation than is the habit of presenting endless wish-lists.

What I'm saying is that budgets are never just lists of numbers. They exhibit the translation of choices into realities. The issue with resources is choice, and that means focusing on what is most important and making sure that <u>that</u> gets the resources needed so that at least what is most important gets done well. I'm going to describe now a couple of concrete examples--it would after all run against the grain of what I'm saying to leave it at the level of the general. But it also follows that the examples I cite are unlikely to be directly applicable outside their local site. If they are useful, it will be because they bring what the general orientation I've been talking about into palpable relation to some of the experiences that are its origin and the touchstone against which it has to prove its validity. You might call the orienting rules of thumb I've been presenting a "theory" if you understand it as arising out of reflection on experience. What I have been arguing against is any "theory" that arises out of self-evident dogmas or out of some very remote

large scheme and is then "applied" to control or command a "practical" realm that is seen as otherwise confused or directionless. So what I'm suggesting is not that anyone take up my general rubrics and "apply" them nor transfer any of my Department's concrete decisions to another situation. Instead, I'm encouraging a "theory" or "view" that arises out of reflection on your own local experience and returns to that local realm.

UIC became a BA-granting institution in 1965 when it moved to a new campus southwest of the Chicago Loop. With no graduate program, virtually all the faculty taught composition and introductory literature courses in small sections of about 25 students. On the assumption that its main mission was undergraduate education, the campus was built with many 32-seat classrooms and few middle-size 50- to 100-seat rooms. About 15 years later, after a long struggle, the Department received authorization from the Illinois Board of Higher Education to begin offering doctoral degrees, and the first was awarded in 1983. Through the 1980s, at UIC as at most public universities, the number of English majors declined sharply, and consequently the Dean let the Departmental faculty gradually shrink from well over 60 to just over 40. As faculty numbers declined and graduate-student numbers increased, composition was handed over to teaching assistants. This was an obvious fiscal necessity. The University couldn't afford to have enough regular faculty to teach 250 to 300 sections of composition a year, and teaching assistantships are virtually the only available support for graduate students.

But is this state of affairs the best? Certainly, it has disadvantages. I will never join the self-denigrating rationalization that claims that teaching assistants are better for undergraduates than tenure-track faculty because they are younger or more energetic or bring a fresh perspective or are closer to the students in age or interests. With full concession that each instance has to be judged on its own merits, I still maintain that on average experienced tenure-track faculty are better teachers than inexperienced graduate students, where "better" takes into account the full range of relevant criteria. Moreover, a large body of teaching assistants that steadily changes requires a lot of training, supervision, and administrative shoring up. But we are also in the business of training graduate students as teachers, and we can't do that without letting them teach. And by and large, they do a good job and the students profit from their instruction.

It is, finally, an inescapable necessity that virtually all composition sections will be taught by teaching assistants. But necessity always contains opportunities for good, and our task is to seize them without wishing away the undeniable disadvantages. In this case, the success of inexperienced teaching assistants will obviously depend on how well we train them. Consequently, we devote substantial resources to that job. Any teaching assistant without previous teaching experience must take a semester-long course in the fall, "Issues in the Teaching of College English," in which the students read and discuss pedagogical research in composition and literary study, work with an experienced peer, tutor in our Writing Center after receiving training, study the detailed manual for our composition courses that have been prepared by a committee of experienced teaching assistants, and prepare and present to the

other trainees their own syllabus for the composition course they begin teaching in spring semester. Teaching assistants receive pass-fail credit for the course and are paid full salary while they train. This is expensive, but since teaching assistants ordinarily go on to teach a number of composition sections over several years, the investment can be amortized. Any expenditure of this kind is vulnerable to objection from the administration, since it diverts funds out of direct instruction. Rather than try to conceal our program, we've pursued the strategy of publicizing it, for instance, by getting our official campus newspaper to print a story about it. The point is to get all constituents--undergraduate students and their parents, the Dean and other administrators, members of the Legislature, the taxpaying public--to see this program in the same light in which we see it, namely, proof of our campus' commitment to providing undergraduates with high quality instruction.

The training we provide is an important mechanism for socializing new instructors and for establishing a strong sense that the teaching assistants are not cheap drudges, but are developing professional colleagues who are sustaining a vital departmental and university program worthy of their energies and their pride. When I first visited the orientation meetings of the composition staff at the beginning of the year, it was this pride, energy, and élan that struck me most. Meanwhile, enrollment pressures have left us little choice but to begin teaching some of our core required literature courses in the major in larger sections--no longer 25 to 30 students, but 70, 80, or even as high as 100. In order to maintain discussion, training in writing, and personal contact, we have added to all big lectures discussion sections taught by teaching assistants. Again, I do not regard this as ideal, and there is no virtue in denying its disadvantages. But on the other hand, we can now permit enrollment in these core courses to expand as needed, so that we do not create a bottleneck that forces students to wait semester after semester for required and prerequisite courses. And we have created opportunities for graduate students to teach literature--and for graduate students in sufficient numbers to begin thinking about ways to create among them a community parallel to the community among teaching assistants in composition and with the same energy, commitment, and esprit. We may even establish a separate training course in teaching literature or redesign our existing pedagogical course. Some faculty members who had opposed large lecture courses (and in truth, they aren't <u>very</u> large) have discovered to their own surprise that they enjoy the sense of performance in the large lecture and the opportunity to work with teaching assistants and contribute to their professional development. In the long run, I think many good things will become possible as a result of a change in the curriculum driven mainly by fiscal necessity. They will be different from the good things that come about when tenure-track faculty exclusively teach small sections and there will certainly be disadvantages. But nonetheless some disctinctive good things will result.

To draw the conclusion, in each case, it is idle to contrast goods we can imagine in a curricular program that is beyond our means against the disadvantages we can see in a program we can actually afford. Any program, whether one beyond our means or one within them, has good and bad, advantages

and disadvantages, and both will be different in each case. Our task is not to dream impossibilities. Our task is to face reality squarely--refusing avoidable constraints and seeking possible improvements, of course--but above all working to produce the best bread that can be baked with the wheat we have.